

## The Return by CCflowerchild

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**Summary:**

The hidden moments that took place mostly in the Byers' house, the day Will somehow lived, they all somehow survived, and El miraculously returned.

They all deserve a break.

## The Return

### Author's Note:

Oh boy, this took so long to write. But for that, it's pretty long. I hope that makes up for it. This was SO hard to write, you don't understand, it's really shitty.

For more of my life story on that -

The white curtains have faint, little yellow dots splattered all over them in an odd, random pattern that, for all the times Mike has been in rooms like this, have taken him a long time to notice. It's weird, really.

Hospitals have always freaked him out as a child. And though he can't say that he's ever been in a lab before, the cold white tiles and blank white walls don't ease his mind any more than every hospital he's been to has. At least, as a kid, the curtains were always a deep, rich colour, to make the patients feel better. Like royal blue or burgundy red.

Of course, no one pays active attention to curtains, do they? His eyes were only drawn to them in the first place, because the white-coated nurse had forgotten to close the window, so now the wind keeps blowing them forward, and they clink a little against the white heater, and since he can't sleep anyway-

Wills soft breathing and the low rumble of the bed calm his nerves at least a little. Mike releases a breath. His friend is asleep, finally. The white - framed bed doesn't look very comfortable, it's small and has thin covers and only one, small pillow supporting Wills neck, but compared to the metal chair he himself is perched on, joints aching and neck bent in a unhealthy way, it must be heavenly to sleep on.

But except for that rumble and his breathing, the hallway is quiet. And the room dark. Before, Joyce had been calling around, asking for Jonathan. Around the time Will had been put to sleep she must have

realised her other son had gone missing and went out to demand a phone she could use to try and call him. Mike didn't know where her oldest son was, exactly, but since he hadn't heard from Nancy, the only part of his family that would even care he's gone and actually look for him, in a long time either, he had a good guess.

Now, however, the woman had fallen asleep on Bob Newbys shoulder, hair tucked behind her ears and a worried frown still painted to her forehead. Bob himself was also asleep. Only Hopper stayed awake. He comes, he goes, he drinks his cup of coffee and glances at Mike in apprehension whenever he realises that no, Mike is still not asleep yet, but he stays awake.

It should be peaceful, yet Mike cannot fall asleep. The quiet doesn't do him well. A prickling sensation just in the back of his head wills him to stay awake, to stay conscious and on the look-out, waiting for the explosion that would surely arrive. It always did, why wouldn't it now?

Mike shuffles in his chair, huffing at the pain in his shoulders. The blanket draped over his shoulders didn't do much in terms of warmth, the chair itself digs uncomfortably into places he'd grown too tall too fast and a tiny part in him wanted so desperately to take his shoes off, but the logical part ruled that out. If the explosion came, and again, a large part of him believed it would, then having to stop in order to wrestle into his shoes and maybe even tying the laces doesn't seem very comforting.

So now here he was, hunched on a chair next to Wills hospital-bed, a dull throbbing between his shoulders and his neck, and the green numbers 3:04 mocking him from his old watch. *El had worn it before.* He had been ready to give it to her permanently.

Huffing again, he wiggles some space into the blanket. The material feels cold against his hands, strange and unfamiliar, it's been so long since he's slept anywhere but his own house, with his own blanket. Whenever he moves, it crinkles ugly, his long limbs find only sparse room inside it, being bend in the most peculiar way, and some weird instinct inside him once again urges him to run, only that he won't.

Not with Will. Not with - whatever this is. Distantly, snippets of the drawings on the walls all over Wills entire house rise into his conscience. He presses them back down as best as he can, but they're there. Tomorrow, he'll have to fight again after an entire year of fighting only his own demons, so he has to sleep, has to sleep now, probably should have been asleep for quite some time now in order to at least survive, but his mind is not letting him.

His ears grow cold in the room, so he covers them with the hood of his jacket and then curls into himself, burying his head into the soft fabric and trying his damn hardest to make his heart calm down enough to sleep.

He doesn't realize it, once it does.

When everything goes to shit the next morning, Mike's not surprised, not really. But while Bob Newby solves the mystery and decides that this is something worth sacrificing for, Will and his friends are something worth sacrificing for, he is surprised at the admiration flooding through him. People have always told Mike he's too smart for his own good, but looking at the man now, tapping his index finger against the blank metal table as the green dots slowly disappear from the radar, he thinks Bob Newby might just be even smarter.

Because Mike pretends not to notice the sweat gathering on Wills sweatshirt, colouring it dark grey, or how sometimes, when he thinks no one is looking, he shifts from one foot to the other to, the one, to the other, shaking his head lightly. He tells himself he doesn't because Will is his best friend. He tells himself it's fine.

He realizes that it's not. Breathy and scared as he sits next to Will. "I'm sorry."

And - and it just makes sense. All of it. The pieces finally fit together.

"It made me do it. I told you, they upset him. They shouldn't have done that!"

It's a trap.

Mike should have appreciated his rest while he could, but now it's

too late.

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The sound of gunshots seem to follow her everywhere she goes. It's like she can't escape them, ever.

White flashes paint her vision every time she lifts her hand, pain shooting from her head into every part of her body and for one miserable moment, El thinks she might collapse. Right here, on the spot, in the middle of the night, in the middle of the woods, only a few steps away from the Byers' house. With the Demogorgons still right by her side, flanking her like soldiers - an irony she's never seen before.

The woman on the bus had been kind to her. She had offered her some sweets; a lollipop and a cereal bar that tasted like hazelnut and blackberry, but the bus ride had been exhausting nonetheless, with its curious smells and faint voices, drowning the calm that came with the slight rocking of the bus as it moved along the streets. And exhaustion is the one thing she couldn't allow herself right now.

Exhaustion, so much of it, dripping down her nose in the form of blood and weakening her, so much, a tiny part of her regrets her decision.

El thinks of Kali. Of Kali and her family, and even of her mother, and exhaustion - so much of it that for a weak moment, she thinks of giving up, overcomes her in such capacity, she's floored. As a child, lying flat on the hard mattress provided by the lab, covered only by a thin blanket that might as well have been a sheet, laying exhausted and cursing out the universe wasn't unusual. It's been her form of an evening prayer, fueled by anger and hate and desperation and so, so much pain. The exhaustion hadn't been unusual. But with Hopper and Mike, with being loved... something's changed.

Nowadays, El isn't so sure if she should be cursing out the universe or not. After all, it had given her Mike. And Lucas and Dustin and Hopper and Joyce. It had given her a bed where she sunk into the mattress, surrounded by colourful pillows and blankets and a teddy bear. It had given her a TV, and soft pullovers that keep her warm even outside and it had given her food and shelter and sometimes

even happiness.

The universe had taken so much from her, but somehow, it had given so much back, too.

Hopper once told her, "There always needs to be a balance, you know? Kinda like a compromise. Without balance, nothing would work. Happiness never comes without pain, but that makes it so pain is always accompanied by happiness, too. You need to remember that kid."

She remembers it now. Maybe this, this is her balance.

And these people, they are her home.

Somehow, that thought surges strength through her, so she beats the monsters. Throws them around, hears them howl in pain and eventually, sees the life drain out of them. And that door, which was the only thing separating her from her loved ones, a flimsy piece of wood - it's nothing close to a challenge.

It opens, nothing more than a flick of her wrist and it opens, and there they are. All of them. Yes, the redheaded girl is there, and a tall boy she has never seen before, but also everyone she loves. They are all there.

All of them look battered up. They have guns in their hands, and slingshots and baseball bats, but they lower them when they realise it's her, their eyes widened.

They are watching her. El bites her cheek, eyes flitting between all of their faces, noting how exhausted they all look as well. She's not alone in this, hasn't been ever since the boys found her in the woods that night, but to see their faces and actually *see* that, it has her drop her shoulders, tension leaving her body.

Something clatters to the floor. A cup, of sorts.

Then Mike is there. His brown eyes shadowed and glassy, but there. His face is so open, all of his emotions and conflict written on top like a billboard, like it always has, because he is not one to hide them, so she waits, until that conflict and surprise turn into a smile. A real

smile. It's all she can do then to not break into tears.

It's been so long since she's seen him smile, so genuine. So long since his expression wasn't cold or tired or desperate or broken. But there he is, smiling and coming forward, grabbing her shoulders and then she's in his arms, enveloped completely by all of him, a familiar weight against her body and oh - she's missed this so much.

A shaky breath escapes her and Mike draws her closer against his chest.

All she wants is to stay here forever. Her posture drops completely, her shoulders falling forward into his chest, her head - eyes closed - nestling on the space between his neck and shoulders, comforted by the familiar smell that hits her nose.

"I called you! Every night, every night for-"

She's already nodding.

"- 353 days. I heard," she finishes. The feeling of his breath on her shoulder and neck still tingles her skin and shakes her concentration, yet she doesn't let go of him. She breathes his smell again. Mildly, the eyes on this exchange bother her, especially those of the redheaded girl she doesn't know the name of, but also Mike's thumb is rubbing circles on her underarm and her heart seems to be much lighter, so she can take this.

Nancy is behind her brother, eyes soft on the girl in front of her, eyes flickering back and forth between her and Mike, when Hopper finally drops his gun onto the couch and fits himself between Mike and El.

She misses his warmth once he lets go of her. Hopper feels safe, like someone made to protect her, but Mike has something else to her that makes her want to curl up beside him, tuck herself into his space and never leave. Mike has always been nothing but warm to her.

In his eyes, though, when Hopper asks her where she's been, is none of that warmth. It's ice. She's seen this kind of cold before, when he'd been looking at his own father, or Troy and his goons, or even at the bad men that had been following her, but it had never been directed at someone she cares about. This, this is hatred. So she worries.

Mike has this glimmer in his eyes, this frown between his eyebrows that appears whenever he figures something out, and it's present, extant with fire in his eyes as the realization comes through; "You've been hiding her."

As soon as Hopper let's go of her, both her protectors leave her, leave her to fight each other. Mike actually shoved Hopper, a man almost twice his size. She can only stand and watch.

Dustins hand lands on her shoulder and maybe it should have been comforting, but it only makes this more real. Especially when a second after, their disappearing figures are nothing more than shadows, stepping through a door at the end of the hallway, and she's left alone with her thoughts and worries while Mike and Hopper fight each other.

"Protecting her? *Protecting her?!'*"

The door falls shut really loudly.

When El turns, Lucas and Dustin stand in front of her. Oh god. She hasn't seen them in so long, never allowed herself to visit them. Her powers were weaker then, couldn't reach out to all of them then and Mike had been more important then, but here they stand, Dustin with a grin on his face and- are those teeth?

They look so worn out. So tired. Lucas has a cut on his left cheekbone, small and not bleeding anymore, but definitely visible from where she's standing right in front of him, dark brown eyes glittering in the dark light. Dustin doesn't look much better than him.

Her features relax and whatever doubt had been left in her leaves in a whim when she sees Lucas and Dustin smile, so she hugs them too. Both of them, at the same time, immediately.

That's when the yelling starts.

"I don't, I don't understand!"

El detangles herself from Dustin and Lucas, who immediately turn to the door Hopper and Mike had retreated to and she sees them exchange worried looks, but that's not what catches her attention.



Nancy, who had by now dropped her gun as well, had immediately taken a step forward before stopping still, hesitation written all over her.

El shares that hesitation. It's not her place to intrude, but it also doesn't seem right to just let this happen, does it? *'I need to see him!'* rings through her mind at the exact same time as: "I don't blame her, I blame you! I blame you!" finds its way into the room.

Everyone looks very uncomfortable at this point, and El can't blame them. But she also understands Mike, understands his frustration, having felt that very same anger pulsing through her veins just a week ago, throwing furniture and bursting windows with her mind. Lucas and Dustin stepped away from the Hallway that leads to the door, Dustin with his hat in his hand, fumbling with it and Lucas who has turned around to look at the girl, the redhead. The redhead who is approaching her right now.

She knows it's not her proudest moment. She isn't even sure why she feels so much repulsion whenever she looks at the redhead - Max. She only knows that she cannot deal with it right now, no matter the consequences, so she simply ignores her and her offered hand, stomps right past her and into the warm arms of Joyce.

"Nothing about this okay! You stupid, disgusting, lying piece of shit!"

This time, everyone turns towards the door. Max and Lucas draw closer, as do the tall boy and Dustin, and El can swear she heard one of the two whisper *holy shit*. But it's Nancy's reaction that hits her the most. The brunette is simply standing still, eyes wide in astonishment, Jonathan pulling her into his chest while Joyce follows him and drags El with her.

Nothing about this okay. It really isn't. Some of the weight that had been lifted off of her returns, heaving down her heart.

All of them, starting with Joyce and her and ending with Max and Lucas are standing in one line in front of the hallway, then. No one says anything. The silence rings deafening, interrupted only by pure anger and raw hatred.

“Liar! Liar! Liar!”

It's a mantra. So similar to the ones she's spoken. She knows what it's like to hope the words were true.

Hopper is telling him to stop it repeatedly and shit-

“Fuck, is he hitting him?!”, Dustin asks. It's the question on everyone's mind, yet no one has an answer to it. No one except for her. Mike had been pushing Hopper before they entered the room, it's not hard to figure this one out. She thinks that deep down, everybody already knew the answer to that question, it's really simple.

“Yes.”

It's short. It's simple. And it explains why seconds later, they all hear sobbing.

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The air outside is cold and harsh, it's blowing wind around rapidly and sometimes, Mike still sees the dust being ruffled out of his hair and into his lap, his pants equally as dirty as his hair and jacket. Damn those tunnels.

He looks down into his lap, his hands clasped on it, fiddling impatiently with some overlapping fabric of his jeans as the silence rings around him, hard on his ears. Sometimes, it's disrupted by Nancy, pacing around inside, just behind the window and even if she thinks he doesn't know, of course he does. Her head pops up by the window sometimes, to make sure he's okay. He appreciates it, but it's not what he needs right now.

But other than that, and some occasional quiet talking, it's dead silent. After Will was brought in, Ms Byers made sure of that.

Will. Mike looks to the door. His best friend is somewhere behind those doors, in his mother's room and on his mother's bed, Mike knows he is. Mike knows he's fine. He's felt his breathing when he hugged him, saw his eyes move when Will scanned the room one last time before collapsing again, but thinking about him is as painful as seeing him was; he looked dead.

*'He almost died,'* something inside him whispers, and yes, right, he did.

All of them almost died today.

Mike lifts his head again, his eyes finding the dark blue sky above him. From his place on the Byers' porch, he can see it pretty clearly, even though there are no stars out tonight, clouds filling up the space entirely. The darkness around him would have made him afraid a few years back, the only thing in his life that scared him. It made him run up the stairs from the basement and jump onto his bed after turning off the lights by the door.

Now, it feels like all he does is fear for himself and others.

The wind picks up once more and huffing, he tightens his hoodie, hoping to gain more warmth. His watch reads 1:23 and if he were home right now, it would be time for his nightly glass of water, but he's not. He's sitting outside in the cold, watching a starless sky with his best friend unconscious in Ms Byers bed, his sister worrying senseless about him, and his other friends in varying states of insanity.

His girlfriend, or girl-he-kissed, possibly dying right now.

Mike flinches when the door behind him creaks, opening, but doesn't turn to see who it is. It's pretty clear by now.

"I'm fine, Nancy. I already told you."

The door falls shut. "I think you could tell her a hundred times, she won't believe you, man," Lucas says, stepping beside him and then lowering himself to the ground, plopping down.

That's when Mike turns towards him. Lucas still has his bandana wrapped around his forehead but the sweat glistens beneath it anyway, as well as the dust and some dried blood, who knows where from. His jacket is gone.

Mike feels very warm suddenly, despite being in the cold. He looks towards the road again. "You should go back inside," he hears himself saying, "It's cold out here."

Lucas breathes out a laugh. "I don't think so."

Slowly, Mike's heart stops missing beats and one, deep breath through the nose and out the mouth is possible. It hasn't been since Max's brother beat up Steve. Lucas seems to have the same sentiment next to him, choking a little on his breathing.

It's curious, how even after everything, their friendship acts as a kind of safety point, a place where no one can hurt you, where you're protected and safe.

For a while, it's quiet. Nothing but Nancy's footsteps, Steve's soft mumbling and Dustin's consoling, though even that stops after while. The street at the very far end of the graveled driveway stays clear and dark, the only movement is the rustling of the trees, caused by the wind. That's when Lucas breaks the silence.

"You called her everyday?"

His eyes bore into Mike's, filled with heavy emotions. Curiosity, guilt, pity. The same shame he's felt since last year curses through him, a dark fog swirling in his stomach and curling around his core, but Mike nods, hesitantly, because this is Lucas, his best friend.

Lucas nods, too, in the end. "You didn't tell me."

"I didn't tell anyone," Mike counters, hoping that that makes it better, at least a little. It seems to, because the corners of Lucas' mouth lift a little, and he shuffles on the hard wood beneath them. Mike leaves out the part of Nancy finding out about it.

"We all missed her, you know. I missed her."

When Mike looks at him, Lucas has his brows furrowed and his hands clutched tightly together, the perfect picture of concern. He's leaning forward, elbows on his thighs, and yeah, Mike knows.

"I knew you missed her, hell, I knew you probably missed her more than any of us, but it didn't- I didn't think it would still..." he stops, like he doesn't know what to say anymore. Mike thinks maybe he doesn't. He wouldn't know what to tell himself.

He decides to fill the silence. "I wanted to tell you."

At that, Lucas lifts his head. "Yeah?"

Mike nods again, "Yeah."

The footsteps inside draw closer for a second, then go back to being a far-off sound, pounding in the back of their heads.

"I just, you know, I didn't know how to. You all seemed to be, I don't know- You all seemed to be dealing with it and I... I wasn't. At least, not in the way I should have been-" His voice sounds clogged up, even to him, like a boy holding back from crying. But there's nothing judgemental in the way Lucas is looking at him, so Mike continues;

"- Everyone stopped talking about her. It felt like I was the only one still hung up on it. And I was so angry about it- about everything, actually. Those calls, they were like, the only thing keeping me sane."

He sounds desperate. He sounds desperate and his leg is shaking so much, Lucas' eyes shift towards it for a second, but nothing happens for a moment. No one laughs at him or scolds him or offers him any type of other consolation. The driveway stays clear and the sky stays cloudy and Lucas says nothing, and all there is is that weight, that heavy weight on his heart, some of it finally lifted.

"I'm sorry," Lucas says. "I didn't know."

"No. No one did," answers Mike. There's no anger anymore. Why didn't he tell him sooner?

Lucas seems like he's about to say something else when the door opens, and a small figure with red hair steps through. Max has her hair up in a ponytail, a sight Mike has never been presented with before, so it's quite surprising, really, and a soft brown jacket that's a little big for her hangs from her shoulders; Lucas'.

Mike and Lucas watch as she slowly pulls the door shut, obviously keen on being silent, before turning around, mouth in a small line, hands burrowed in the pockets of Lucas' jacket. *There's no anger anymore.* Not for her, either.

"Come here," Lucas says, waving her over with his hand and for a split second, Mike sees the conflict in her eyes, the flicker of her gaze

towards him before she takes a step closer, and he hates himself for causing it. Pure anger, for no one but himself rushes through him, a burning hot fire he won't be able to distinguish for a while.

So he makes his first step, let's the first drop of water fall. Even with the limited space on the porch, between the steps and the fence around it, he offers Max a little smile and shuffles over so that she can sit down between him and Lucas.

"I'm sorry," she whispers once she's seated between them. "Nancy finally decided to go see Jonathan, and Dustin fell asleep next to Steve, so I came out here."

"It's fine," Mike and Lucas say in unison, and this time, Max smiles back.

Mike knows he hasn't been fair to her. It weighs on his heart, along with all the other mistakes he's made, so he will do anything to fix it.

That's when they hear the gravel move and see the headlights hit the line of trees. Before anyone else has the ability to, Mike is on his feet, moving towards the currently parking vehicle, his feet working on their own demand, his mind a constant repetition of *El El El El*.

When he reaches the car, Hopper has already hopped out of the driver's seat and rounded the car, opening the passenger's seat. El.

The door hits the farthest it can go, but Mike stops in his tracks when he sees her. Her, with dried blood between her nostrils and down her cheeks. Her, with curling hair and veins visible beneath her eyes. Her, barely conscious.

"El."

It's a breath, a sigh of relief and disbelief, but she heard him.

"Mike-" She's making grabbing motions at him while Hopper lifts her up and surprisingly, the man doesn't say anything, doesn't even acknowledge it, just let's Mike take her hand as he carries her inside, passing Max and Lucas by the door as they hold it open.

The house inside is a mess. No one bothered to take down the paintings of the tunnels, there's blood on the carpet and an

abandoned first aid kit on the living room commode, in-between used needles and an almost empty bottle of naco-se-medicine.

Also, Steve Harrington is passed out on the couch, beaten bloody and blue, only in a ripped T-shirt and his muddy, dirty jeans, with Dustin right beside him, head resting on the older boy's shoulder.

When the door closes behind them, Nancy comes storming into the room, hair one big mess, her shirt still a bit moist from the sweat. Hopper looks at her and grunts, but at least he doesn't completely ignore her like he did with everyone else in the room. "Where's Joyce?"

Nancy is staring at El in Hopper's arms, at her brother's hand so tightly gripped between both of hers. "Asleep." Her voice is monotone, eyes don't leave her brother. "She, Jonathan and Will all are."

Hopper nods, shifting El in his arms as she mumbles Mike all over again and again.

"Jonathan's room is still free, isn't it?" It's Lucas who says it, and that's all it takes for Hopper to move immediately, Mike following him because he wants to and because he has little choice, with El still holding him.

Nancy leads the way and opens the door for them when they reach it, waiting for them to go in first, so they do, Hopper moving quick towards the bed in the center, so Mike tries his best to lift the covers with only one hand.

The bed creaks a little under her weight, but soon El's head is supported by soft pillows, and a heavy sigh escapes from her lips when she feels them. Mike feels her pressing his hand, curling in on herself.

"Oh boy," he hears Hopper mutter. The man is smoothing down El's hair gently, eyes soft and face relaxed. After a moment, he pries his hands away from her, locking his gaze onto Mike who's still sitting on the bed, shoes kicked off, holding El's hand tightly. For a second, he seems to be torn, looking back and forth between Mike, El and

Nancy, who had her back on them and is rummaging through Jonathans closet.

“I better go find Joyce,” Hopper attempts, slowly, as Mikes eyes follow him. Another drop of water onto the fire, a sign of trust, a white flag for peace. Then, Hopper smooths out his uniform, and leaves.

El shifts a little below the covers, her legs touching his knees, so Mike looks back down to her. El has her eyes closed, blue and green shadows painted under them, and even though Mike knows she just defeated the shadow monster and closed the gate, possibly- no, definitely saving the world, she still appears so delicate, so soft.

He wishes he could protect her.

A voice rips him out of his state.

“Mike.” It's Nancy.

He turns to see his sister standing there with sweatpants and a shirt in her arms, held out to him. They appear to be Jonathans, since the dresser behind her is still halfway open, and there's no way Mike would fit in anything that was Wills. Not anymore. “Go change, you stink. I'll take care of El.”

Mike knows she's right. He hasn't showered since the day before yesterday, his last day he spent home, and he's been wearing the same clothes ever since, so he sure as hell can't be smelling very pleasant. Still, glancing down at Els fingers in his, he would rather do anything but stand up right now. He just got her back.

“Come on,” Nancy says, voice soft, placing the clothes in his lap and putting a hand on his shoulder. Mike sighs. He glances down at El one last time, before extracting his fingers from hers one by one, so he can let her go and leave.

El seems to be too tired to protest, because after some soft groaning and her hand following him as he stands, she does nothing.

His legs feel like jelly or pudding once he tries to stand, a product of all the things he's seen today, all the things he had to withhold today.



It seems miraculous, a bouquet of four-leaved-lucky clovers handed to him, but here he stands, with El behind him and his sister in front of him, still walking. Still alive.

A small hand touches his cheeks. He didn't even notice Nancy stepping closer. "You did so well today," she murmurs, her hand brushing back the hair behind his ears, "I'm so glad you're okay."

A tingling spikes from her hand on his cheek towards his heart, a soft whisper of comfort in which he finds the power to smile at her, to lean into her hand and nodd. "I'm glad you're okay, too."

Nancy smiles then, showing her teeth and crinkling the sides of her eyes, a low shimmer present as they meet his. "Go," she tells him, reaching behind him to grab the clothes, before pushing him towards the door.

The air inside Jonathans room had been cool and clean, the boy kept his window open at night, so stepping back into the clogged heat that filled the rest of the house was it's own kind of agony. It feels suffocating, like any second now, Mike will collapse, like El and Will and Steve before him, only that he will never wake up.

He shakes his head, trying to clear it and steps a little more into the hallway. There's soft voices coming from in front of Ms Byers' room and after a closer investigation, Mike can see that it's Lucas and Max, sitting shoulder to shoulder on the ground with their backs to wall and their feet stretched out before them.

They look small, incredibly small, bruised and bloody and dirty, and Mike wonders, just for a second, how all of them possibly made it out of there. He can tell now why Max decided to put her hair into a ponytail, the grease and dust still make up almost half of his hair, and his is not even half as long as hers. It's disgusting.

When they see him approaching, their eyes don't land on him, they land on the clothes he's holding, and the fact that he doesn't have his shoes on anymore. Lucas doesn't say anything though, his stare is cold and tired. It's Max who voices it: "I think I might take something from Ms Byers. She said El, Nancy and I could before she fell asleep."  
- With a pained smile she lifts herself up, looking at Mike first, then

holding Lucas' stare for a moment before disappearing into the dark room behind them.

Lucas hasn't moved an inch.

Mike takes another step closer, careful not to step on his feet. His best friend looks void, like he himself had so many times, and his heart aches at the sight. He reaches his hand out, slowly, to grab a hold of Lucas' arm, "You should take something out of Jonathans closet." His voice is strained as he hoists him up, helps him straighten his back.

Mike hates seeing his friends this way.

With one last push, Lucas stumbles in the direction of Jonathans room. With the path now cleared, Mike quickly steps into the bathroom and changes into the clothes he's been given. Not before washing his face and his hair though, holding his head under the faucet. The cold water feels icy on his scalp but it does the job, as seconds later, he sees all the dirt vanish into the drain. After a few minutes, enough of it seems to be gone.

Careful to not look into the mirror, knowing that would only send him down a spiral of anger and sadness and wallowing, Mike opens the door again, to find Lucas standing on the other side, leaning against the wall by the door, eyes closed and expression tired. He too, has clothes in his arms, clothes he deserves to change into. Lucas doesn't say anything, doesn't even acknowledge Mikes wet hair as he pushes through the space in the door. Mike only pats his shoulder, and closes the door for him.

In this sea of emotions, exhaustion seems to be humane and normal, at least.

When Mike returns to the room, Nancy is no longer in there. In fact, had El not changed her clothes and also washed her hair, there would have been no sign of his sister ever being in there at all.

El. She's lying on the bed, conscious now. Her hair is wet, small curls forming on her forehead, and her face is clean, all traces of blood swept away, so only raw emotion remains. She's looking at him, holding his stare, with her head pressed into the pillow and her body

curled into the covers. She isn't saying anything.

He carefully lowers himself onto the covers of the bed, ignoring the squeaking and the low rattle, keeping his concentration only on her. She has curls. She has curls and she looks older, somehow, much older than when he last saw her. Though, maybe he looks much older as well.

"Mike." Her voice is nothing but a whisper, a low sound he hasn't heard in so long, it sends warmth through his entire body, starting at his heart, radiating off him in waves. Her hand reaches out to him, so he takes it, circling his thumb over her soft palm.

He feels like crying. The familiar burning sensation returns to his throat and he has to bite his lip to contain himself, even though he's barely managing that. "I missed you so much," he chokes out, deciding now is the right time to lie down next to her.

It's a position they've never been in before. His head is parallel to hers, they're laying face to face. But his legs are so much longer than hers now. There's barely any space between them.

She smiles a small, pained smile that reaches her eyes nonetheless, gripping his hand a little tighter. "I missed you, too."

That's all he needs, really. Tightening the covers over him and her, Mike draws closer to her, and presses a kiss to her forehead, gently, nothing more than a little pressure. It makes her smile. She curls her legs around his and lets her forehead fall into the space between his shoulder and neck, breathing in. Mike puts his one hand around her waist, and that's that.

Exhaustion overcomes them.

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At first it's a low rumble, something easily ignored. Her half-conscious mind can edit it out without trouble or concern. Then it becomes louder, and louder, and suddenly she is awake and very annoyed.

El lifts her head a little - it's all she can do with Mike's arms still

wrapped around her, enveloping her in warmth and comfort - and tries to find the source of the noise. To her surprise, the room is full of people, sleeping on different ends of it. Yesterday, Mike and her were still alone. Today, Max and Lucas are lying together by the end of the room, just in front of the door, Max with her head on Lucas ' stomach, a brown jacket as her blanket, and Lucas, head supported by a pillow El is sure she's seen before, on the living room couch.

A few metres away from them is Dustin, his hat dipped to cover his eyes, arms crossed in front of him like he hadn't meant to fall asleep. Maybe he didn't. He is also the source of the noise though, his breathing making the sounds whenever he breathes in. Snoring. One of her words for day 112, when she discovered that Hopper, too, snored. She would very much like to hit him with her pillow.

She doesn't. El averts her gaze, observes the scene a bit more.

Nancy is the closest. Her arms are crossed on the mattress, her head is atop of them and her hair surrounds her like a halo, so much even, that some of it touches Mikes back. It's a curious sight, Nancy is usually very collected and poised, carries herself confidently, like someone who can't be touched. To see her, looking so immensely small and fragile, is new to El.

Something like a coffee machine is running in the very back, so Hopper and Joyce are probably already awake as well.

El doesn't know what time it is, but judging by the sunlight streaming through the blinds, it's late enough to wake up. She doesn't want to, though, so she simply turns back around to face Mike, burrows her face back into the soft pillow beneath her, counts the freckles on Mikes nose and cheeks until calm rushes through her again.

So she falls back asleep. With Mikes heartbeat in her ear and all her friends around her, surrounding her and building a circle of safety.

### **Author's Note:**

So. I'm alive.

Again, I'm super sorry this took me such a long time

to write, but my life was just one big mess the past few weeks so I can actually explain that shit:

I'm a senior in high school. Which is like two years earlier here where I live than it is in America. After high school you can go decide if you want to work, want to specify in a field and go to school and work for that, or if you want to go to university. I decided on Uni, but you need to do three more years of school to gain ~general knowledge~ in order to be accepted into any university at all, and those three years I have to do on another school, so all the things with that have been exhausting as hell.

Then, because of me being a senior, I also had finals! I was dying. But guess who passed all their finals? THIS GIRL. No more exams for me, fuck school honestly, I'm done. But yeah, I had to study a lot, or at least sit in front of my papers worrying about studying, so that took up a lot of time.

Then, also because I'm a senior, we have all these traditional things here. It's about five things every senior class does, kind of. First, one last class trip somewhere, staying there for seven days and living life together (I learned how to surf how cool is that). Then design and print and buy a pullover that the entire class, including the teacher gets. Then plan the senior-prank-day, which honestly my class hasn't even finished doing yet. And also Motto-Week which is planned, finally. And, of course, our graduation party and after party.

I was also on the yearbook team, and we just finished editing it.

And even though I hate shopping and spending money and looking for clothes, I had to go find an outfit for my graduation and all that shit, so here I am, exhausted.

My Birthday was also in-between there, and even though I didn't do anything for it, I still allowed myself to be lazy that day, and that might not have been the best decision in my life lmao, but, you know, I'm done.

Then, a few of my friends celebrated their birthdays, and with celebrated I mean \*celebrated\*. I don't drink, but being there was exhausting enough.

Also, I finished writing this a few days ago, but I couldn't post it because then our Internet didn't work and I had to watch shitty movies all week it's been weird as hell. Even though I also read some good books and my mother finally got me IT on DVD, life has been a big mess.

All of that, in like 6 weeks. Help me.